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Book Review: Fighting for Time: Rhodesia's Military and Zimbabwe's Independence

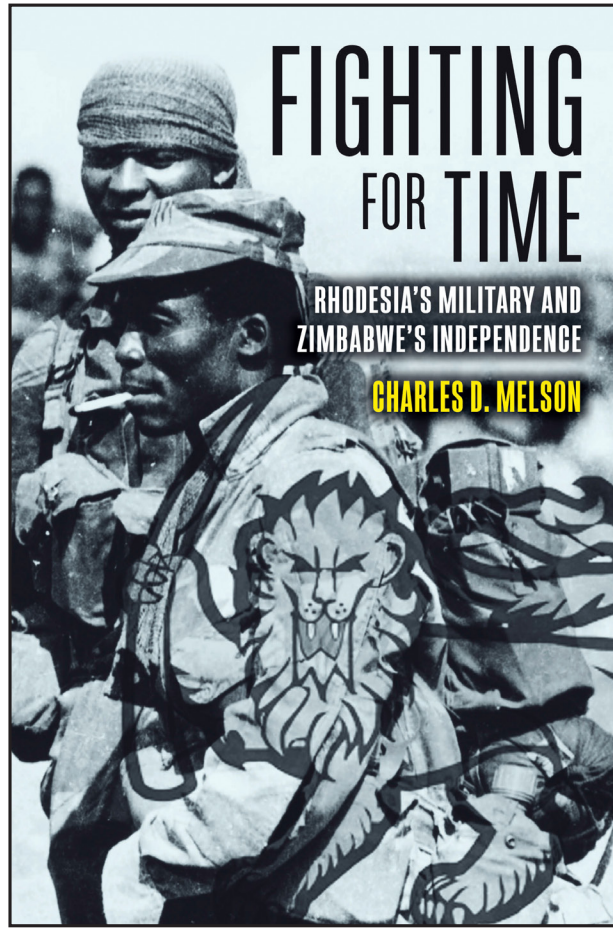
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Reviewed by Dr. Charles G. Thomas, associate professor of comparative military studies, Air University Global College

The 15-year long guerilla struggle for Rhodesia from 1964–80 remains a fascinating subject for modern historians. Commonly called the Bush War, the conflict featured challenging political narratives, complex international dynamics, and impressive operational innovations by the military of the White settler state. Despite an expanding body of publications on the war, it remains a fraught topic of study. Thankfully for scholars, Charles Melson's *Fighting for Time* has joined the larger body of literature on the Bush War and can be considered the most complete and critical addition to the historiography to date.

Until recently, the majority of publications on the Bush War have been memoirs such

as Chris Cocks' *Fireforce* (30 Degrees South Publishers, 2009) or Tim Bax's *Three Sips of Gin* (Helion & Company Limited and GG Books UK, 2013). These publications are challenging sources because, like all memoirs, they are potentially unreliable due to distance or author self-interest. This issue is even more apparent in topics authors often do not want to engage with (such as the Bush War), which centered on the decolonization of Rhodesia and featured ugly racial dynamics.

The other main body of publications tends to focus on specific units within the Rhodesian military and their operations. This focus is not surprising as the Bush War saw impressive levels of military innovation from the isolated settler state, with units

such as the Selous Scouts or the Rhodesian Light Infantry carrying out remarkable military operations throughout the conflict. Sadly, these publications too often whitewash the war or avoid confronting Rhodesia's goals in preserving a White-dominated government.

Finally, with limited exceptions, the remaining histories of the Bush War focus closely on wartime operations, spotlighting where the Rhodesians were overwhelmingly successful. This emphasis on the operational often obfuscates the critical truth that, despite their operational brilliance, the Rhodesians were wedded to a flawed and isolating strategy due to their political goals of local and regional White-settler dominance.

Unlike other publications, *Fighting for Time* is as comprehensive and critical as a single volume about Rhodesia's military during the Bush War may be. Over eight substantive chapters, Melson does an exceptional job exploring the establishment and organization of the disparate and often innovative parts of the Rhodesian security services. These explorations are skillfully interwoven with the operations these forces undertook and how the operations informed their own continuing evolution. The book includes insightful chapters on the role of Rhodesian airpower, the establishment of the signature fireforce tactics of the counterinsurgency campaigns, and even the decision to undertake cross-border attacks to preempt further guerrilla activity. This structure allows Melson to approach the more familiar aspects of the conflict (such as the Selous Scouts or Rhodesian African Rifles) and contextualize them within the larger scope of the war. Additionally, it allows his work to stand on its own and also aids in connecting the fragmented body of memoirs and unit histories on the war into a larger narrative.

To produce this overarching history, Melson combined impressive archival sources with extensive interviews with

former officers and rank-and-file forces within the former Rhodesian military. Given the challenges involved in researching and sourcing African archives, Melson's feat is impressive. This combination of effective structure and exceptional sourcing has produced the most complete history of the Rhodesian military currently in print.

Overall, Melson's book is a critical addition to the expanding body of work about the Rhodesian Bush War. Melson deals plainly with the truths of the conflict, making *Fighting for Time* useful as a centralized narrative volume. In his introduction and conclusion, Melson carefully explains that much of the military innovation of the Rhodesian military was due to its political isolation during the conflict, a fact not disconnected from the White settler-dominated political order of Rhodesia. He also consistently notes that while the military could be operationally brilliant, it was in service of an ultimately losing strategy. Given the continued fights around Rhodesia's legacy as a state and its current connection to White supremacist mythmaking, it is heartening to see these facts laid out repeatedly. A minor issue with the volume is Melson's acceptance of the framing of Rhodesia's African nationalist enemies as terrorists (as opposed to guerrillas)—a loaded term within these larger historiographical fights.

Despite that minor issue, *Fighting for Time* remains an impressive work and one that should become the central academic reference for those interested in the Rhodesian military, its evolution throughout the Bush War, and the reasons behind its operational successes and ultimate strategic defeat.

Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2021 • 336 pages • \$65.00

Keywords: Rhodesia, Zimbabwe, Bush War, Selous Scouts, Rhodesian Light Infantry

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